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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 3120  
INFO RUEHPF/AMEMBASSY PHNOM PENH 0038  
RUEHVN/AMEMBASSY VIENTIANE 0015  
RUEHHM/AMCONSUL HO CHI MINH CITY 3328  
RUEHBK/AMEMBASSY BANGKOK 0314  
RUEHHI/AMEMBASSY HANOI 2180

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 HO CHI MINH CITY 000960

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STATE FOR EAP/MLS, PRM, AND DRL/IRF

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TAGS: PHUM KIRF PREF VM

SUBJECT: CENTRAL HIGHLANDS ETHNIC MINORITY PASTOR FREE BUT RATTLED

REF: HCMC 0623

**¶1.** (SBU) Summary: Y Ja Nie, a Central Highlands ethnic minority Protestant pastor arrested on February 12, 2007 (reftel), was released on August 31. ConGenOffs met privately with Nie and separately with local officials in M'Drak district, Dak Lak province, on September 6. According to local government authorities, Nie was arrested because he had "damaged national unity" and needed to be re-educated. Authorities did not recognize Nie's status as a pastor and considered his some of his activities (religious and non-religious) to be outside the law. His denomination, the Vietnam Inter-Christian Fellowship (VNICF) does not yet have GVN recognition at the national level, and only a handful of congregations have been able to register nationwide. In contrast to reasons given by local officials, Nie said he believed he was arrested because he had been contacted by a Front Unifie de Lutte des Races Oppprimees (FULRO) "exile" in the United States. This person had asked him to receive and distribute money to the families of seven imprisoned ethnic minority individuals. We have not yet learned whether any money was actually transferred. He did not report any particular problems with either practicing his faith or working as a pastor. Nie's release after six months of detention may indicate that the GVN did not perceive his actions to be especially serious. Post is continuing to monitor his situation closely, especially because he has asked to be resettled in the United States. End Summary.

Who is Y Ja Nie?

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**¶2.** (SBU) Y Ja Nie, also known as Ama Bin, an ethnic Ede, first came to Post's attention in December 2006 when he requested a Humanitarian Resettlement application. Subsequently, as reftel reports, he was arrested for "involvement with the Dega movement." A week after his release, ConGenOffs met with him in his house church. Nie told us that he was on the staff of the pre-1975 Ministry of Ethnic Minority Affairs, but was too young to have been in re-education. He became a Protestant with the Southern Evangelical Church of Vietnam (SECV) in 1973 and joined the VNICF in 2003. His house church congregation was also established in 2003 and he became a VNICF pastor in 2004 after receiving training and passing an exam in Ho Chi Minh City. Currently his house church has 120 members, although he noted that attendance had fallen while he was jailed. Nie is also the Deputy Chief of the VNICF in M'Drak and two neighboring districts in Phu Yen and Gia Lai provinces. There are a total of 510 followers in the three districts. All are ethnic Ede and use the Ede language in their worship. He did not report any particular problems with the VNICF house churches or among other Protestants in his area, most of whom belong to the SECV.

How did he get into this mess?

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¶13. (SBU) Nie's sister fled to Cambodia and has been resettled in Canada (NFI). He has been in touch with her since she resettled. Nie speculated that she gave his phone number to Y Duen Bon Dak (phonetic), whom Nie described as an exiled FULRO member. In June 2006, Dak called him and asked Nie to receive a bank transfer and distribute the money to the families of seven ethnic minority prisoners jailed for their involvement with exiled FULRO members. Nie said he felt it was his pastoral duty to help the families. However, he believes the contact with exiled FULRO members eventually led to his arrest. After he was arrested, he said there were criticism sessions in his community denouncing his connection to FULRO.

¶14. (SBU) Before going to Nie's home, we called on the M'Drak District People's Committee Chairman who told us that Y Ja Nie was arrested because he had violated the national unity policy and that he had needed to be "re-educated." The Chairman then informed us that Nie had been released and that we could visit him. (Note: We had previously not been aware of Nie's release and had only asked to meet with his family. End note.) Initially the Chairman planned to join us for the visit, citing his desire to ensure Nie "spoke accurately" about his activities. However, after we noted that our reports are considered more credible if GVN officials are not involved in our meetings, the Chairman changed his mind and allowed us to meet with Nie privately.

A pastor or not?

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¶15. (SBU) According to the Chairman, Nie is not a pastor and cannot lead his congregation because his organization (VNICF) has not yet been officially recognized by the GVN. The Chairman

HO CHI MIN 00000960 002 OF 002

said Nie had only followed Protestantism for "a short time" and had used local donations for his own personal political activities. The Chairman stated Nie also had contact with unspecified "illegal organizations" in the province.

Forced to join the SECV?

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¶16. (SBU) In a March 4, 2007 press release, the Montagnard Foundation (MF) alleged that the GVN was trying to force Nie to join the "government recognized church" (the SECV). We asked Nie whether this was true and he responded that he had not heard of the report, nor had he ever been forced to join the SECV. We asked whether he was under any current restrictions and he replied that he knew of none. However, a week after his release, he did not yet feel comfortable enough to leave the area of his home. (Note: ConGen's political dissident contacts often report feeling same sense of 'virtual' house arrest because their houses are under police surveillance and they are followed when they leave their homes. End note)

What does this mean?

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¶17. (SBU) Nie was far more comfortable discussing FULRO than most ethnic minorities we have encountered. Nonetheless, his overall manner was subdued and he admitted that he was frightened about what had happened to him. We discussed the status of his Humanitarian Resettlement application and confirmed that he was still interested in resettling in the United States.

¶18. (SBU) Comment: Receiving and distributing money from FULRO could have led to serious charges and a long prison sentence, but Nie's release after about six months' detention indicates that the GVN did not find his "violation of national unity" serious enough to follow-up with formal charges. Local authorities do not appear to be infringing on Nie's basic rights

to religious belief, but they are concerned about Nie's leadership position. Although he may have been acquainted with the "FULRO exile" who telephoned him, Nie said he had no previous involvement with FULRO. Though he did not explicitly say whether he actually transferred money for FULRO, Nie admitted that he had been naive about the implications of being a conduit for money from FULRO. The incident shows both the GVN's ongoing sensitivity to "FULRO" activities and perhaps some ability to distinguish material threats from humanitarian gestures.

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